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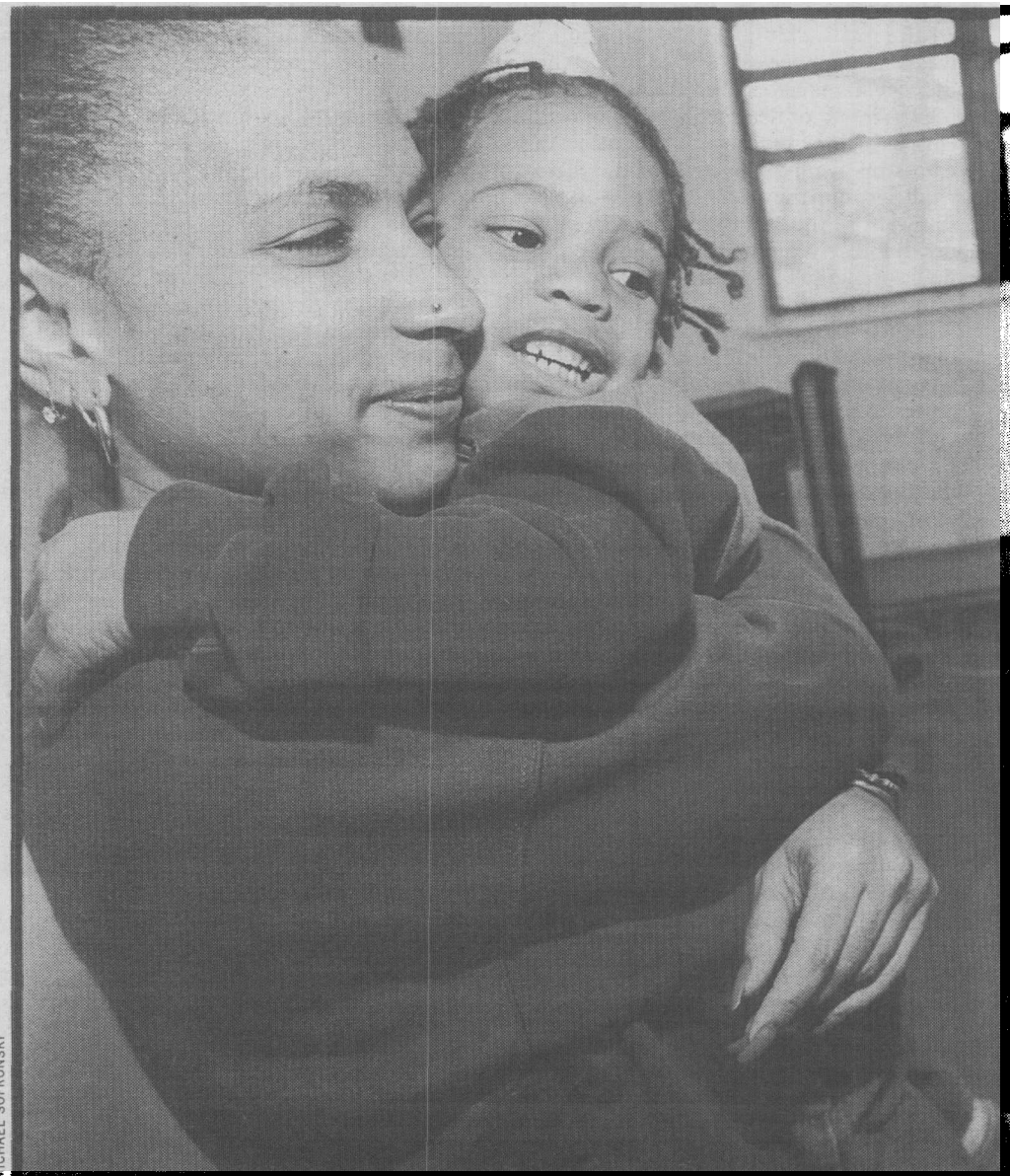
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# KILLING THEM CHEAPLY



Dawn Young and her children face a predicament she calls "damned if you do, damned if you don't."

## THE GOVERNOR'S WELFARE PROPOSAL IS HELL ON PEOPLE WITH AIDS

By Mark Schoofs

**D**awn Young doesn't have full-blown AIDS, but she is infected with HIV. As a result, she suffers from ulcers, frequent colds, severe night sweats, anemia, and diarrhea for about two weeks out of every month. "I get very frustrated and start crying," she says. "I'm young, so why do I feel like this old lady?" Despite these problems,

Dawn has been denied SSI, the main federal disability program. The reason? She's not sick *enough*. Michael Kink, policy analyst for the AIDS organization Housing Works, says this is common. "SSI standards are very high," he explains. The program only accepts people who are deemed "unable to do any job in the economy." >>

➤➤ Currently, Dawn and her four children get by with a raft of public assistance benefits. But, spurred by federal welfare reform, Governor Pataki has proposed sweeping changes that would jeopardize those benefits. For people with HIV, advocates charge, the governor's proposals are especially cruel—and shortsighted. Dawn Young personifies their concerns.

Many people with HIV are stranded in a

**T**he safety net program is the bedrock of the governor's welfare proposal, yet many advocates charge it is grossly underfunded. The Pataki administration denies this, but advocates fear that budgetary pressure could force case workers to kick people like Dawn out of apartments and into the cheaper—but crime- and drug-infested—shelter system. Dawn has lived in the shelter system, and doesn't want to go back: "My kids have a yard to play in. I don't open the door to a neighborhood full of crackheads."

In addition, Dawn faces a predicament she calls "damned if you do, damned if you don't." Because of her ulcer and other problems, she had been losing weight, and her doctor prescribed her an appetite enhancer. Trouble was, it made Dawn sick. But there is something that both restores her appetite and ameliorates her night sweats: marijuana. "I smoke a reefer after I make dinner so I can eat, and then I go to bed," she says. "I'm feeling better, I don't wake up tired."

Many people with HIV and cancer report the same benefits. But under the governor's "zero-tolerance" policy, anyone who tests positive for any illegal drug would be kicked off welfare or the state's temporary disability program. Then, according to the governor's bill, *everyone in the household* would be denied cash.

In general, "that would probably help the children," says Theresa Westcott, a spokesperson for the state Department of Social Services. If a parent has tested positive for illegal drugs, she explains, "they're likely to be spending their cash benefits on drugs" rather than on things their children need.

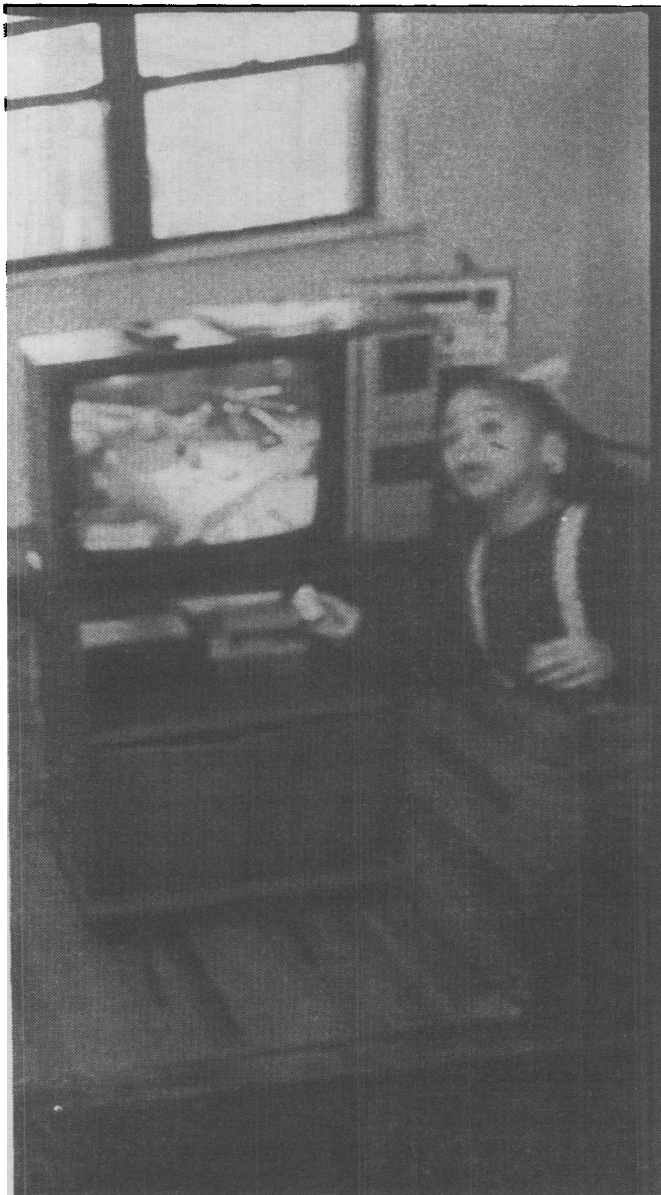
Advocates charge that these measures are not just cruel but a danger to public health. Many HIV-positive people got infected through IV-drug addiction, which is notoriously hard to overcome. Under the stress of living without cash, many people in the voucher-only program would sink back into addiction, and thus become more likely to spread the AIDS virus, through shared needles, prostitution, or survival sex. Dawn, a 32-year-old former cocaine user who has been clean for two years, says she would do anything to provide for her kids, including "getting a pack of condoms and selling my butt."

Finally, the new protease-inhibitor drug cocktails require sticking to a strict regimen. Missing doses can lead to the development of a mutant HIV that is resistant to many medications, as happened with tuberculosis. That's why many AIDS scientists urge government to do everything it can to forestall the emergence of such viruses. But by pushing many infected welfare recipients even farther into poverty, the governor's program could actually hasten the emergence and spread of a mutant HIV.

"So-called advocates have been chanting their doom and gloom predictions for years, only to be proven wrong again and again," counters Michael McKeon, Governor Pataki's press secretary. "The governor's plan represents a new opportunity to help people on welfare build a better life for themselves and their children."

Dawn is trying to do exactly that, but she has a different opinion: "The government doesn't give a damn about people with HIV."

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medical limbo—not sick enough to be declared "permanently disabled" but not well enough to hold down a job. The governor says he will allow HIV-positive people to receive state-funded disability payments through a medical examination, but advocates say this policy won't work. For starters, the state program is limited to one year and designed to be a stopgap measure that lasts only until a person gets into the strict federal program. Then, too, the welfare examiner would not be the patient's regular doctor and might not realize how debilitating that person's symptoms are. Kink fears the state's new program would catch only those patients with "the most advanced illness."

What would happen if Dawn were denied disability? She would be placed in the governor's proposed workfare program, which requires participants to work 20 hours a week, with strict attendance demands. Dawn worries about what kind of work she would be forced to do: "Am I going to be out on the streets in the weather, picking up trash? What about germs and diseases?" She's also frightened that her health will betray her, and cause her to be kicked out of the program.

In that case, Dawn would be shunted into a "safety net" program that provides only vouchers, not a penny of cash. But her current cash benefits are often a lifesaver, carrying her family through the numerous and inevitable bureaucratic snafus: "Today is the 20th," she says, "and I still don't have this month's food stamps."

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